

Moral Agency in a Propaganda System

By Mark Nelson

Introduction

Freedom of the press is offered as one of the most important elements in a free society because only a journalistic community unhampered by governmental control can work to root out corruption, expose wrongdoing, and provide the information which the general populace must possess if it is to responsibly exercise its fundamental rights. Journalists themselves proudly point to such events in American history as the Watergate crisis, the Pentagon Papers, Iran-Contra, and many others, as examples of the way the American free press works in the interest of the common citizen.

Importantly, one of the key justifications for society's need of an unfettered press is the need of the people to know, a need which must be met in a society which is ruled by the people. Without adequate knowledge, the people would be unable to take responsible action, either in their own interest or in the interest of society in general. Framing this concern a little differently, it is a prerequisite of informed moral agency that the people be provided with accurate information. Moral agency, always a troublesome concept, is basically the idea that people, as individuals, are, and ought to be, held accountable for the "rightness" or "wrongness" of their actions. Moral agency has something to do with the relationship between means and ends – actions, intentions, and consequences.

A society which does not provide adequate information to its citizens challenges their effectiveness as citizens, and it challenges their ability to make informed choices at all. In short, it challenges their ability to hold themselves and others responsible for all of their actions: it challenges their moral agency.

A fundamental issue for this paper will be the development of an adequate conception of moral agency, and the conditions necessary for individuals to practice it fully, with the intention of demonstrating that these conditions are not met in American society, and that this lack is at least partly due to the media. To accomplish this, I will outline a propaganda model of the mass media from Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*, which attempts to explain how the American free press, the supposed vanguard in the defense of democracy, actually serves elite interests in our society, and fails in its self-proclaimed mission to provide accurate information to the

people. After examining the quality of the society created by such a propaganda system, I will compare it to the requirements of my model of moral agency, and show how society, and the individuals in it, can come up wanting, before finally offering a few suggestions as to how this situation might be improved.

The Propaganda Model

Any proposed explanation of the media's behavior in terms of a propaganda system is bound to meet resistance. Journalists report that they receive no pressure to censor news items, or to tailor their coverage in a particular way. The entertainment media protest that they merely provide what the public wants—after all, the people wouldn't watch it, if they didn't like it, they say. For these reasons, a propaganda explanation of media behavior must also explain how the enactors (and victims) of that system could be completely unaware of it. Chomsky and Herman's model provides just such an explanation. They do the main work of demonstrating its truth in their book, and the interested reader is directed to it if they wish to see more detailed analysis supporting the model. I will here merely outline the model, and argue for its basic plausibility.

The key concept in the propaganda model is that of filters.¹

A physical filter is a tool for removing extraneous material. Likewise, the conceptual filters employed in the propaganda system are conceptual tools for removing extraneous information. Herman and Chomsky argue that all media reaching the public have first passed through five filters, each one removing some content before passing through the rest:

1. Size, ownership, and profit orientation of the mass media
2. Advertising as the primary source of income
3. Sourcing
4. Flak
5. Anticommunism (or anti-anticapitalism)

These filters are supposed to act as economic "framing conditions" for our society, establishing basic parameters for the presentation of information. Once these parameters are in place, conscious control (a conspiracy) is not necessary to explain the behavior of the media, as the people who

constitute the media (reporters, writers, producers, etc.) learn to reflect the filters in their choices regarding the information they present. If a person were to build a system of canals for water, it would not be surprising to see the water follow the path of the canal, even without the conscious input of a human, directing each molecule of water in the direction she wants. The framing conditions, the canal, have been put in place ahead of time, and pouring water through the system leads to a predictable result. In an analogous way, the five filters serve as economic framing conditions, through which information is ‘poured’, resulting in predictable outcomes.³

1. The ownership/profit filter.⁴ Media sources generally operate under the profit model—they are businesses whose purpose is to generate profit for their owners and shareholders. Naturally, there are a number of media sources which do not operate under a profit model—National Public Radio and the Pacifica Network are two obvious examples for whom the first filter does not directly apply. However, the mainstream media, which has the greatest reach, is dominated by profit interests. This, according to Herman and Chomsky, is a natural consequence of the free market. The cost of establishing a newspaper, for example, has become so high that a newspaper will lose money until it manages to acquire an extremely high circulation.⁵ The initial debt incurred in starting a media source often requires substantial investment from outsiders, who, as Herman and Chomsky show, are frequently extremely wealthy individuals and families with extensive ties to other large, profit-driven corporations.⁶ Thus, the first filter is media control is concentrated into the hands of wealthy individuals and large corporations.

What sort of information will this filter tend to pass through to the public? Only information which does not challenge the societal position of the owners and corporations, or the profit system through which they maintain that position. This control is established at least in the hiring of top level managers and the selective promotion of lower level employees.

2. The advertising filter.⁷ Advertising is the primary source of revenue for most media sources, indeed, for many it is the only source. Imagine two media organizations with equal circulation, one which supports itself solely on subscription fees, while the other supports itself through a combination of subscription fees and advertising. The second organization will have much greater resources available for the improvement of the product (better writers, higher quality production,

more marketing), and it will tend to take the subscribers of the first organization, due to the combined effect of lower subscription price and apparently better product. This process tends to force media sources out of business if they cannot win enough advertising support.

This is a natural consequence of a market system, but it does create a problem for the standard view that the market provides “better” news and media service. One justification of the market system is that consumers can “vote with their pocketbook”, boycotting producers that engage in questionable practices or that provide inferior products. But when the most profitable media organization is the one with the greatest advertising revenue, the consumers themselves cannot directly vote with their pocketbooks, the advertisers do. Herman and Chomsky mention the case of the Daily Herald, a British newspaper which focused on issues of concern to the working class. Despite holding 8.1 percent of daily circulation in Britain (twice the readership of The Times, Financial Times, and The Guardian put together), it could only garner 3.5 percent of advertising revenue, and was forced out of business.⁸ The people did vote with their pocketbooks, in support of the Daily Herald, but the paper failed anyway because advertisers have much bigger pocketbooks, and they voted against the Daily Herald.

So what kind of information will pass through a media organization which is dependent on advertising revenue for its survival? Information which does not challenge the practices of specific, favored advertisers, the corporate system, or the need for strong consumption of resources (and it is much better if the information can manage to encourage the corporate system, the need for strong consumption of resources, and champion the causes of specific favored subscribers).

3. The sourcing filter.⁹ News organizations require a steady stream of information which can be processed into the news we see. One source of this information is the investigative reporting that news organizations pride themselves on. But such reporting is expensive, and frequently it challenges the interests of media ownership. It is much simpler to avoid issues that might hurt the owners, and much easier to rely on standard, credible sources of information. Several common sources of credible information is the government itself, corporations, trade groups, and some universities. These sources receive media time and respect, thereby further enforcing their societal positions. This has a crucial impact: it establishes a standard of credibility in society which is only met by institutional figures, marginalizing further those individuals and groups which do not already

enjoy popular support and media time. This makes it much more difficult for marginal, critical voices to receive widespread attention, as their positions will have to be so much better justified than those of the groups which receive attention by default. Further, this provides government and elite interests an easy road to publicity, allowing them to manage the news into a format suitable for their purposes, and to set the terms under which debate takes place on important issues.

4. The flak filter. Whenever a controversial story or program is aired, some groups in society immediately respond by flooding the offending media source with complaints and threats of boycotts. Large groups, and those already in strong societal positions, will tend to be more effective in their flak campaigns due to their larger numbers and larger monetary base. Such flak is a direct threat to the media source, and any advertisers that support the program. Therefore, in general, media management and advertisers will choose not to support such programming. In particular, programs which are critical of societal norms, almost by definition, will generate more controversy (and flak) than any other kind of program, thus media management will tend not to risk airing such programs.

This filter tends to pass material, then, which is uncontroversial, and supportive of the views of groups already dominant in society, as those groups are the ones most likely to effectively utilize flak in controlling the media.

5. The anticommunism filter.¹¹ This filter is sometimes also referred to as the “evil-empire filter”, the “anti-ideology filter” or the “anti-anti-capitalism filter.” Anticommunism has been an integral element of American society for at least 80 years, though its power may be waning as the communist states around the world crumble and accept a market system—it is no longer necessary to beat the dead horse. But this type of ideological filter may still be in operation, as evidenced by the coverage of the anti-globalization movement in the past few years. Few of the protestors are ever interviewed, and stories about the protests focus on “violent anarchist elements”, without discussing the merits of the protestors’ varied positions, or even offering a definition of what the protestors mean by “anarchism”.

That said, the function of an ideological filter like this one is to marginalize voices which are not sufficiently in line with the standard view, and to limit the range of debate to a small set of ‘acceptable’ choices. This can be seen in America today in the two-party system, which increasingly

homogenizes political debate while loudly proclaiming the important “differences” between the Republican and Democratic parties. If these two choices represent the outer limits of acceptable political views, then how insane must a person be to suggest some choice outside this spectrum? Thus positions outside the standard range of debate are labeled “communist” or “anarchist”, or are simply ignored. This happens when the ideas suggested really are “communist”, and also when they are simply “more liberal” than the mainstream, or “too radical”. Thus the range of debate in mainstream media is limited to a few select issues, and generally to the particular methodology to be employed in seeking already agreed upon goals. Questioning the desirability of these goals is so far outside the “normal” range of debate that it can safely be labeled “communist” or “anarchist”, and ignored.

In concluding this overview of the propaganda model, it is helpful to remind ourselves what sort of material will tend to pass through all five of these filters: material which reflects the interest of the ownership of the media source, does not offend advertising sources, relies on “credible” sources from government, industry, and academia, does not offend prominent groups or individuals in society, and which does not, at least, promote anti-capitalist views, though it is often better if it can manage to denigrate such views (or other marginalized ideologies) as well. It is important to recognize that these filters are postulated not as some “shadowy conspiracy”, but as the natural result of market forces, and it is only reasonable to expect that the media would reflect a bias toward those forces. The writers, reporters, actors, etc. who constitute the “face” of the media learn to reflect that bias as well, just as we all do, through the operation of market forces, which enforce particular outlooks in the selection of topics and the framing of questions.

Taken together, these filters constitute a grave threat to democracy. If a functioning democracy requires well-informed citizens, a propaganda system like this one cannot promote a functioning democracy. But, as I hope to show in the next two sections, there is a much more fundamental danger in the effects such a system has on the people who are subject to it.

Moral Agency

I have two questions to answer here: (1) What is moral agency? and (2) What conditions are necessary for its growth and exercise? In answering these questions, I am indebted to a thorough analysis of the issue by Alasdair MacIntyre. Moral agency is the idea that a person is, and ought to

be held, responsible for both their actions and the consequences of their actions. This of course implies some framework for judging the value of an action and its consequences, and it implies the possibility of reward or punishment for certain kinds of actions. Generally, a person is not considered to be a moral agent when it is not reasonable to hold them responsible for their actions. Thus a small child is not a moral agent, but becomes one later in life, an example which is particularly instructive for my purposes.

A small child is not a moral agent for several reasons: (1) she does not yet have a concept of 'self-identity' with her actions. This means that she has not developed the capacity to recognize the connection between herself as a person who intends something, herself as a person who takes actions, and herself as the perpetrator of unintended consequences. A person who cannot even recognize the causal connection between their intentions and their actions certainly is not reasonably held accountable for those actions. (2) After (or concurrent with) developing the concept of identity with actions, the child must also develop some methods for predicting the possible outcomes of an action. Ordinarily, a person is not responsible for the unintended consequences of their actions (their accidents), when they could not reasonably have predicted the results of those actions. A child needs to be able to predict in order to plan, and thus, to be held responsible. (3) After (or concurrent with) developing the ability to predict outcomes, the child must also learn to predict the desirability of these potential outcomes. If she could not have known that a certain unintended consequence far outweighs the intended benefit of an action, then she could not reasonably have decided not to act in response to that undesirability. Thus it would not be reasonable to hold her responsible for having acted anyway. Not possessing any one of these abilities would be sufficient to determine that the child is not fully responsible for her actions, but we have not yet found all the qualities of a full moral agent.

For example, many former members of the Nazi regime in World War II Germany were found guilty of crimes against humanity, despite their protestations that they were merely "doing their duty". Their defense rested on the claim that they could not be held responsible for taking actions which were required by their societal positions, for not considering factors which their society judged to be irrelevant, and for acting to achieve results which their society judged to be 'good'.

But many of these people were found guilty at Nuremberg, a precedent which depends on the premise that all adult humans (or at least, these adult humans) are capable of questioning even the most fundamental assumptions of their society and position, and that they are culpable for failing to question these assumptions. Essentially, the claims of these individuals that they had acted according to the standards of their society opened them up to the question, “Why were those the best standards available?” and to the charge that they should have questioned those standards.¹²

This ability completes the list of qualities of a full moral agent, leading to the following definition:

A moral agent has to understand herself as a moral agent, which means to hold herself responsible, and to be held responsible by others, for (a) that in her actions which is intentional, (b) that in her actions of which she should have been aware, (c) the “reasonably predictable” effects of her actions, and (d) the criteria by which she decides what standards to apply in evaluating a-c.

Several comments are in order. First, on the apparent circularity of the definition: to practice moral agency one must be aware of the responsibilities one holds—one cannot reasonably be held responsible by others when one cannot hold oneself responsible. This means that the moral agent has to understand herself as a moral agent, which, as the definition states, means that she must understand and hold herself responsible for the four aspects in the definition.¹⁴ Second, the definition will serve as the ideal of moral agency for my purposes. But as will be clear from the development of the requirements of the definition, moral agency should be seen as a quality that occurs in degrees. As the example of child development showed, one can be taken to be responsible to differing degrees at different times in one’s life, and to differing degrees with respect to different kinds of decisions. (e.g. A student cannot be held responsible in the same way as the instructor for an accident in a chemistry lab. The difference in their two situations in terms of knowledge and accountability require different degrees of responsibility for the effects of their actions. Thus they are moral agents to different degrees in some of their decisions.) Further, this definition places two kinds of requirements on the full moral agent: she must have information, and she must have certain skills in evaluating that information. Naturally, these skills are complementary, as skill in evaluating information leads to skill in acquiring information, and further acquisition of information leads to

refinement of the skills of evaluating that information. Information is required for the agent to fully understand the situation in which she finds herself. She must know facts about possible actions and their possible outcomes, knowledge of which is partly acquired developmentally (e.g. the skill to recognize causal connections), partly through direct effort on the part of the agent (e.g. doing research on past attempts to perform the actions she is contemplating), and partly through passive reception by the agent (e.g. having learned in the past through the news, schooling, membership in various groups, etc. about similar situations).

Skill at evaluating this information implies the ability to recognize when the information is sufficient/insufficient, when it is trustworthy/untrustworthy, and it also implies the ability to evaluate objectives, to determine the desirability of different outcomes. This is most clear in part (d) of the definition, which is the point at which values enter the decision to act—the agent must consider what kinds of consequences are relevant to their position, which consequences are more important than others, and what would constitute a ‘good’ result. There exist a myriad of different frameworks for evaluating these possibilities, embodied in religion, law, custom, and personal principles. Part (d) of the definition requires both that the agent consider her actions from within some ethical framework, and also that she must actively consider and criticize different frameworks in her decisions, and that she must understand herself as capable of such deliberation.¹⁵ It is through this kind of consideration that people exercise different frameworks in different circumstances—actions which are considered ethical in the workplace are not considered ethical at home. The killing of a person by a soldier would probably be judged as good, but a civilian killing the same person would be condemned as a murderer. Part (d) also brings in the question of relevance—according to some frameworks of judgement, and in some circumstances, an action which results in the death of, say an insect, is not judged to be bad, because the death of the insect is considered irrelevant. In other situations, and in other frameworks, that death would be the most important consideration.

These questions are exceedingly difficult to deal with—asking them, and dealing with them appropriately, requires a certain kind of society, a society which actively encourages the questioning of values and the frameworks through which judgements are made, to support the growth of the ability implied by part (d) of the definition. Specifically, society must provide milieus in which it is both possible and safe to question societal values, and to compare alternative frameworks. This requires education that encourages the critical mindset, examples of the critical lifestyle that others

might seek to emulate, and media through which people can communicate their concerns regarding different values.¹⁶

It is this last that is most important, as it is conceivable that a nonconformist genius might learn a critical mindset alone, but to fully exercise this mindset, she would require feedback from others to ensure the correctness of her criticism. Some might object here that it is possible to achieve correct moral results in isolation. But I suggest that if morality and moral responsibility are to mean anything, they must also entail accountability to other members of society. The reason is captured in the first part of my definition, “a moral agent must ... hold herself responsible, and be held responsible by others for...” Moral responsibility is formed communally, it is a relationship—between people, their actions, and the criteria for evaluating those actions. In forming or joining a group which holds particular values (e.g. taking a job at a particular company), one accepts to some extent the values of that group. One’s performance as an employee is evaluated by others in the company in relation to the standards set by the job position, which are learned through observation, questioning, and through trial and error—but always in dialogue with other employees, managers, etc. In short, one learns the standards of their role in cooperation with others sharing the same standards and obligations. A person only understands their role, their responsibilities, and the consequences of their failures, in communication with others in their company. Thus a person who chooses to abrogate the values or particular responsibilities of her social position may be justified, but she owes some explanation to the group whose values she has violated, and to society at large for the correctness of the values through which the judgement was made.¹⁷

Thus communication and a supportive, critical community, are essential to the practice of critical moral judgements.¹⁸ This feedback would take the form of questioning between individuals regarding values and judgements, leading to mutual understanding of the reasons for the decision that is ultimately reached. Such a process is not always possible, for it is unsafe to publicly question values in some societies, and in others the means of communication are limited or impractical, and in some others, such processes are implicitly and explicitly discouraged.

I have outlined a definition of moral agency, and identified two kinds of requirements for the exercise and development of that agency: informational, and evaluational. Both of these requirements can be met in part by the concerted attention of the agent, seeking out information and developing the ability to reflect critically on values and judgements. But both of these requirements

must also be met by society at large, for it is not reasonable to expect the individual to root out all the relevant information for every decision—as some of that information would be located in distant places and difficult to acquire. And it is not reasonable to expect the individual to independently develop the critical abilities required by part (d), as such abilities presuppose rational confidence in one's decisions, which is only acquired through a process of collective dialogue and criticism, as I discussed above. It is therefore a responsibility of the society, as well, to supply the informational and evaluational requirements of the moral agent, if full moral agency is to be a realistic possibility for the members of that society.

Moral Agency in a Propaganda System

My remaining question is relatively straightforward: given that a propaganda system does operate in the mass media, does our society enable, or disable, the practice of full moral agency, as defined in the preceding section? Answering this question requires us to consider the effects of the propaganda system on individuals.

As discussed above, people make all of their decisions from within some context, a framework which establishes the relevance, and the relative value, of different concerns in the decision process. When people leave one context for another (moving from the home to the workplace, for example), they are forced to some extent to change the framework through which they make decisions. In judging the 'goodness' of these decisions, they apply normative standards, allowing them to pick out the right framework for the right situation. It was this skill that I identified above as one essential component of full moral agency, the evaluative ability to justify the framework through which a decision is made.¹⁹ These normative standards, as with the lower level frameworks used constantly, are created through a social process. People follow the example of others that they respect and they learn from their mistakes, as revealed through the impact of prior decisions on others within their social framework, and through critical discussion with others. One source of a normative framework is the mass media, which possesses almost unrivaled power in establishing standards for society, due to its ability to provide information and language which can be shared by all.

But what is the character of this normative standard created by the media? If the propaganda model is correct, it reflects the interests of media ownership and the profit system, is not offensive to

advertisers, is underwritten by information provided by ‘expert’ credible sources (the government, industry, and some members of academia), is not offensive to large groups in society, and reflects a common anti-anticapitalism (or other anti-ideology). This normative standard, then, is one that is antithetical to the practice of evaluating the values and framework of judgement of society. Further, a propaganda system will not fully satisfy the informational requirements of the moral agent. Let’s examine each of the five filters in turn to see how:

1. The ownership filter. The normative standard created by the media would reflect assumptions that are in the interest of the ownership of that media, including the preeminence of the profit system and the corporate structure which enables the wealthy to maintain their societal positions. Those at the top of the social ladder have the greatest stake in maintaining the status quo, and the media they control is likely to reflect this preference. Societal standards which promote the status quo are obviously antagonistic to the critical attitude required by moral agency, as criticism of the status quo is one of the fundamental ways in which evaluation is achieved. This filter will also tend to remove information which is damaging to ownership interests, making informed choice difficult if not impossible in situations where that information is difficult for the individual to acquire.
2. The advertising filter. The societal norms will reflect the interests of advertisers, who require people to act primarily as consumers. Media sources will then tend not to provoke controversy, or rather will tend to encourage the “buying mood”, and will not seek to provide “extra” information that might lead individuals to question the structure of society.
3. The sourcing filter. The societal norms will reflect the interests of the cultural elite, the government, industry, and academics who stand as the standard sources of information for the media. Further, this filter results in the entrenchment of “expert” opinion as the only source of valid information, which encourages the perception that the non-elite should be passive in their acceptance of domination—that they should not seek to acquire information themselves, or question the opinions provided by those in power. Both of these results tend to undermine the ability of

individuals to act as moral agents, as they lack the information and confidence necessary to engage in critical review of their decisions.

4. The flak filter. The tendency of controversial media material to produce flak is the most obvious threat to the critical attitude required by moral agency. Those who do present controversial material are taught quickly that it is much easier to avoid difficult subjects, and the media gradually becomes free of examples of critical voices. While this in itself does not completely prevent informed moral agency, it certainly makes cultivation of the critical attitude much more difficult, due to the absence of respected and critical examples in the public sphere, and due to the absence of information which might be damaging to powerful interests in society.

5. The anti-anticapitalism, anti-ideology filter. The anti-ideology filter results in a narrowing of the range of acceptable debate in public discourse. Since moral agency requires the cultivation of the ability to criticize societal norms and decisions, any limitation to the range of acceptable debate places a limit on the degree to which moral agency can be practiced.

Conclusion

I am left now with a much more difficult question: to what extent is moral agency challenged by the propaganda system? Are humans in this propaganda society simply drones, with no moral voice whatsoever? Or are they completely able to shake free of this oppressive force? I think that it is reasonable to suggest that the extent to which the propaganda system is actually operant in a society determines the extent to which moral agency is challenged in that society. I have by no means demonstrated that Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model is correct, though I choose to accept it because it fits the facts. But I do think that I have established a connection between the model and the requirements of moral agency. Were propaganda control of the media total, then that propaganda would significantly infiltrate the realm of public and private discourse, discouraging the cultivation of the critical attitude, and placing severe constraints on the flow of information to the public, which I have argued is essential for the practice of full moral agency.

Some might object here, as MacIntyre does in his article, that despite these challenges to moral agency, individuals in such a society are still to be held fully responsible for all their actions. His basic point is that individuals, as citizens of this propaganda-led society, have contributed to the creation of the propaganda system: their own inaction has created the state of affairs which makes it difficult for them to make informed choices, thus they are still responsible for those choices.²⁰

While I tend to agree that individuals should not be ‘let off the hook’, so to speak, I think that two criticisms can be made against MacIntyre’s view: (1) Not all humans contributed to the creation of the propaganda system through their inaction. Most humans were in fact born into a system which already severely constrained the flow of information and the presence of critical examples. (2) Even if humans are complicit with creating a propaganda system, there are still clear systemic barriers to their practice of moral agency. The propaganda system, if it is in fact operating, does not provide adequate information, and it discourages the cultivation of critical attitudes. Only tyrants can reasonably hold that limitation of debate and the flow of information is a good thing. This means that the media system needs to change, to fully promote the practice of informed moral agency, regardless of who is at fault for putting it in place.

But how can such a change take place? The specific systemic cause of the propaganda barrier to moral agency is the cozy relationship between the corporate and government systems, and the use of market forces to control the media, which is the operating factor in each of the five filters in the Herman and Chomsky model. Changing the media to allow full access to information, and to provide examples of the critical life may require a change in the basic economics of the media—profit may be antithetical to the goals I have outlined. Of course, this should not be taken to imply that all non-profit media systems are better than the profit based system operating in the United States today. There are many examples in recent history of how government controlled or privately owned media companies can act as propaganda machines for their owners, even when they operate independently of a market or profit system. While somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, the lesson that we might take from this could be summed up in terms of the first filter: “Ownership determines content.” If we accept that it is desirable for individuals to practice moral agency as fully

as possible, then we should seek to create a different kind of media system, always keeping in mind the dangers that can go with non-market systems as well.

But even without such a sweeping change in the media and market systems, there are other actions we can take to improve the situation.

I have argued that information and critical debate are the essential components of moral agency. It is my hope that a concerted effort to practice these skills (by all individuals), and to acquire information in spite of the propaganda system's limits, will result in fundamental changes to the system and to the people who compose it. A rediscovery of the concept of personal responsibility, and continued development of these skills, can undermine the importance of the propaganda system, by providing examples of the critical life and training for those seeking to implement it themselves.

Some might wonder here if I have simply assumed that moral agency is a supreme good, and that rediscovering it will be a panacea for all society's ills. I hold no such delusions. Reforming society will require a sober assessment of the situation we find ourselves in, and of the most effective methods to achieve change. I think that a commitment to personal responsibility for one's actions, and to collective responsibility for group decisions (i.e. moral agency), which, as I have argued, entails ready access to information and evaluational skill, will go a long way toward allowing us to make that sober assessment of our situation. Where we go from there will depend on which other goals we set for ourselves, and how we decide what things really are 'supreme goods'.

Finally, I have concluded that the moral agency of individuals is challenged, and severely compromised by a media propaganda system. In future work, I would like to examine the effects of this lack of individual responsibility on social institutions: the government, corporations, schools, etc., which are composed of these morally challenged individuals. My suspicion is that organizations begin to acquire emergent properties, behaving operationally much like a moral agent (setting goals, altering actions to achieve goals, reflecting on past outcomes, etc.), when individuals abdicate that responsibility themselves. One effect of organizations acquiring these characteristics would be to institute a propaganda system in the first place; other effects of this process might serve to explain the behaviors of organizations. I would finally like to examine how all these considerations lead to constraining the list of possible actions which a concerned citizen could undertake, with the hope of changing the system for the benefit of all.

Notes

1. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon Books) , 2.
2. *Ibid.* 9.
3. David Edwards, *Burning All Illusions* (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 9.
4. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon Books) , 3.
5. *Ibid.* 4.
6. *Ibid.* 9.
7. *Ibid.* 14.
8. *Ibid.* 15.
9. *Ibid.* 18.
10. *Ibid.* 26.
11. *Ibid.* 29.
12. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Social Structures and their Threats to Moral Agency," *Philosophy* 74.289 (1999), 314.